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— HISTORY —

Windham's First Baptist Church has deep roots

Part one of seven

Windham's First Baptist Church was officially organized in 1827 in the Jillson Hill mill village at the Willimantic Falls section of Windham, some six years before several mill villages formed themselves into the self-governing borough of Willimantic.

Unofficial Baptist services had been taking place since 1825, and in October 1827 a Baptist preacher from Lebanon named Chester Tilden (1796-1872) arranged for a Baptist Council meeting, consisting of members from Baptist churches at Lebanon, Mansfield, Wethersfield, Montville and Ashford, to be held in Tilden's home on Tanner's Lane, the original name of North Street.

The Council voted to form a new church and appointed Tilden as its first pastor. The first service of the new Windham (Willimantic) Baptist Church took place in the "white school house" located on Water Street, a



Tom Beardsley

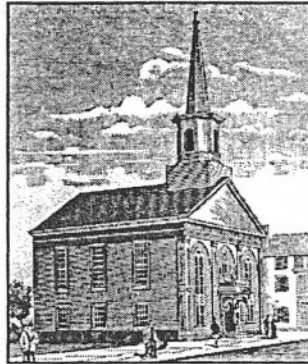
thoroughfare consumed by the building of the Willimantic Linen Co. mammoth mill number two in 1864.

The Evangelical revival of the early 19th century, known as the "Second Great Awakening," had politicized the Baptist, Methodist and Episcopalian churches in Connecticut, and led to the new state constitution of 1818 that disestablished the congregational-puritan church as the official church of Connecticut.

By 1825, Windham was being settled by men and women seeking employment in the cotton mills sprouting along the Willimantic River. Many of them were evangelical Protestants, and desired their own place of wor-

ship.

A stonemason led the Baptists' cause. Lebanon's Chester Tilden was in Windham building Willimantic's first stone mill for Seth and Asa Jillson. The remains of this mill can still be detected



Woodcut of Willimantic's First Baptist Church, published in 1891 in the Illustrated Review of Connecticut.

beneath the Thread City Crossing.

Chester Tilden served as the church's first pastor until November 1830, when he was appointed pastor of the Baptist Church in Andover. He subsequently preached across Connecticut, and became the pastor of Baptist churches at New London, New Britain and Plainfield. He died in Willimantic in 1872. In 1879 his son, Chester Tilden Jr., sold the plot of land on which the family house stood to Silas Loomer, who subsequently built the Loomer Opera House on the spot.

Chester Tilden Jr. moved the family house a few yards northwards. The Tilden house, at 28 North St., where Willimantic's first Baptist Council meeting was held in 1827, has served as fish store, grocery store and for many years was the home of the Clark House Restaurant. The Loomer Opera House was demolished in 1940, and replaced by a

Woolworths store.

Historian Richard Bayles noted that the Willimantic Baptists' initial religious practices had caused a "spirit of opposition" in the village, and they were debarred the privilege of using local schoolhouses for worship.

Willimantic's Baptists received threats that the "white schoolhouse" would be blown up if they did not leave. Chester Tilden, who had briefly served as the pastor of the Lebanon Baptist Church before being appointed to the new Willimantic post, immediately undertook the task of organizing a church building fund. This meeting took place on December 26, 1827, and was attended by Nicholas Brown (1769-1841) of Providence. Brown was a leading Baptist in America's first Baptist church at Providence, and a wealthy merchant, and the head of the mercantile house of Brown

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and Ives. He is probably better known through his generous donations to Rhode Island College, which was renamed Brown University in 1804 in his honor.

Nicholas Brown pledged \$100 to the building of a new Baptist church in Willimantic, and promised to obtain help from his friends. Adequate funds were raised and the structure was built in 1828-29. It was dedicated on May 27, 1829. The site was purchased by Alfred Howes, and the Baptists engaged Messrs. Reed, Hardin and Fenton of Mansfield to erect their new church.

The new church would serve the

local Baptists for almost 30 years. In 1858 it was sold to the Rev. Michael McCabe, the pastor of Willimantic's recently formed Roman Catholic parish. He removed it to Jackson Street where it served the borough's growing Irish and French Canadian population.

The old Baptist Church was removed to Valley Street in 1872 when the current St. Joseph Church was built.

Willimantic's original Baptist Church became a part of St. Mary's parish and survived until 1955, when it was destroyed by the fire that burnt down St. Mary's School.

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